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ABSTRACT

The functional communication course described in this paper was created in response to requests by students and administrators at the University of Minnesota for a single course that would combine writing, speech communication, and audiovisual topics. The paper provides background information about the general college of the University, which is composed largely of students seeking a broad range of work-related communication skills, and about the functional communication course that was developed to meet the needs of students within the college. The paper describes the goals of the course and offers examples of specific assignments. It explains how much of the teaching in the course has been turned over to students, who are responsible for preparing and giving oral presentations on specific topics. It also describes small group assignments that simulate business meetings typical of organizations. The paper reports that student performance on pretest and posttest cognitive measures reveals that the course has been successful and that it has received positive student evaluations. The paper provides a list of 10 conclusions that relate to the possibilities and limitations of such functional communication courses. (FL)

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"FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION AT MINNESOTA: INTEGRATING COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINES, ON AND OFF THE CAMPUS"

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Midwest Regional Conference

The American Business Communication Association (ABCA)

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Functional Communication at Minnesota: Integrating Communication Disciplines, On and Off the Campus

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Requests by students and University administrators for a single "crash course" combining business writing, speech-communication and audiovisual topics led in 1980 to the General College's development of a ten-week experiment named Functional Communication (FC). Assisted by University grants and Lilian O. Feinberg's consultancy, FC is now entering its third experimental offering as GC 3533 and is expected to take its place next year within the group of primarily on-campus courses we have packaged as Functional Communication I.

During the same period General College also began to offer a much different version of Functional Communication off campus, in facilities provided by local corporations such as Land O'Lakes and Western Electric. This FC Sequence II emphasizes flexibility. Instead of a tight syllabus of interdisciplinary readings and interconnected work assignments within a classroom "corporation," the off-campus program offers a corporation classroom: their employees study the company's choice of twenty-five topic modules ranging from personal data sheets to parliamentary procedure, in loose, "cafeteria"-style combinations for variable amounts of Extension course credit. Assuming continued availability of grant funding (increasingly, from non-University sources) to underwrite the costs of hiring adjunct faculty and developing new topic modules, this flexible off-campus FC II should continue to grow in popularity as rapidly as the integrated crash course. (We are hard pressed to keep up with demand for both versions.)

As the coordinator of both Functional Communication sequences, I am often asked what they have in common and--even more often during the last year or so--why in the financially uncertain 1980's we are launching a new program. The answer to the first question is that both FC sequences seek to teach (or sharpen) only the practical communication skills needed for day-to-day survival in today's organizations. The answer which this paper proposes for the second question is that FC works, and it pays for itself. Because

ABCA members have already received a description of the off-campus program from a colleague of mine, I shall concentrate on the experimental on-campus FC course.[1] But first a word about General College and its students.

With some 2500-3000 students from all imaginable backgrounds, General College "is the freshman admitting college at the University of Minnesota that fulfills the University's obligation as a Land Grant Institution to provide open admission to all Minnesota residents seeking access to the University."[2] Since 1970 these open-door admissions have included increasing numbers of adults returning after several years in the workplace, attracted by our self-designed Baccalaureate programs. An equally strong attraction is our lineup of professional programs offering certificates in areas like Marketing, Human Services, and Legal Assisting. A fairly typical General College student--whether of the "traditional" college age (18-22) or older--might be employed at least half time while also carrying a full credit load. Often our students' only common denominator is the expressed need to learn a broad range of work-related communication skills, and quickly. (They do not need to be motivated by mention of the recent employer surveys that point up a deficiency of communication skills among the new graduates.[3]) That need was the push that launched our Functional Communication experiment.

Our program consultant, Lilian Feinberg, proposed that we partly emulate existing courses that combine business writing with business communication, and partly try an experiment in "synergy."[4] For the pilot course, Feinberg proposed as an irreducible minimum the following topics: (1) basic business letters, memos and short reports; (2) pre-printed reporting forms; (3) jobseeking research, correspondence and interviewing; (4) practical public speaking and listening-note taking skills; (5) organizing and running meetings; (6) concepts of organizational communication; (7) a non-specialist's introduction to computerized Management Information Systems; (8) graphic aids for written and oral reports; (9) audiovisual techniques for speeches and meetings; and (10) an overview of word processing developments to date.

The task of integrating ten such complex and open-ended areas of study within a ten-week course struck all of us as formidably difficult, particularly when the pilot was given the administrative limitation of 5 credit hours per week (four class hours plus one spent in small groups, A-V lab, etc.). For

the third experimental offering I have dropped the MIS and WP units and trimmed back some others. Student cries of "information overload!" still are heard. I have private moments when I fear we are trying the impossible. Yet the first two groups of students have given positive evaluations, and on cognitive pre- and post-tests have shown meaningful upward movement: for both experimental offerings the percentage of students in the pre-test's top third was tripled on the post-test, and the bottom third either cut in half or emptied. (See attachments.) Test scores should not receive too much emphasis, yet they can reassure nervous experimenters: despite the cries of "overload" from students and "superficiality" from some colleagues, a good deal of learning is demonstrably taking place in FC. My entirely subjective impression two-thirds of the way along is that two assumptions in particular are behind our comparative amount of success.

First, since the specialists estimate that as many as 90% of the people in our contemporary "work world" are employed in organizations, we assumed that we should do our utmost to forge the FC class into a unitary "corporation" of twenty interdependent co-workers.[5] Second, since classic studies of our work-world organizations suggest that something like four-fifths of them use small groups every day to move the work forward, we assumed that our "FC Corporation" too should be subdivided into small, permanent groups who would have to learn to live and work with each other for the duration.[6] The individual details of our experiment all followed from these assumptions.

WORK ASSIGNMENTS AND METHODS OF HANDLING THEM

In all three experimental offerings of FC we have taken the basic approach of loading up the syllabus with more work than one instructor could reasonably expect to handle, then turning much of the teaching and some of the evaluating and grading over to the students themselves. In the current (third) course, which doubles earlier versions' amounts of individual student oral reporting, this approach is being tested even further. (A frank admission: the individual student-taught topic probably is not handled as thoroughly and accurately as the teacher would teach it. But the net amount of learning is probably com-

parable, because students find it much easier to listen to each other than to the teacher. And there is nothing like the prospect of giving an oral report to concentrate a student's mind wonderfully, if I may paraphrase Dr. Johnson on the subject of death by hanging.)

In the same way, we included on the syllabus more business writing than one student might expect to write for an inter-disciplinary course which is only one-third business writing (at least in theory). But we also provided for several of the assignments being written by a small group for a collective grade. Here is a listing of the current course's ten work assignments: (1) resume and job application letter (produced individually); (2) meeting minutes (individually); (3) memo evaluating a videotaped professional interview (produced in groups); (4) first oral presentation (individually); (5) self-critique summarizing peers' preprinted form evaluations of oral (individually); (6) collection of typical business letters (groups); (7) taped meeting, ranking the memos about the professional interview (groups); (8) second oral, designed around its A-V aids (individually); (9) self-critique, again summarizing peers' evaluations (individually); and (10) memo-report evaluating the quarter's work and recommending any needed changes (groups). It will be seen that there is an approximate balance of individual and group assignments, with more group assignments coming in the second half, when groups are better acquainted. Again: I think that the key to understanding why students improve so much from pre- to post-tests is the idea that they are getting up much of the information for their own oral presentations, and listening with greater interest to a variety of peer speakers than to one teacher. I should also add that our outside reading in three textbooks (business writing, business communication, meetings) is done pretty diligently because of our weekly quizzes (not taken in groups).

Taking a look at one day's "Agenda" taken from our twelve-page syllabus may clarify the relation between readings, writing, meetings and oral reports:

Friday, May 7: Meetings in Business and Professional Organizations:

1. Before meeting do reading: Augers chs. II, III, XI, XII.
2. Put badge on; vote on Minutes.
3. Get an overview of meeting types and uses. $$ (_____)
   Learn rule of thumb for deciding when meeting wouldn't be useful.

(cont.)

(Agenda, cont.)

Learn common meeting types: staff, committee; informational, fact-finding, problem-solving, decision-making; sales meetings, conferences, seminars, workshops, etc. $$ (_____)

4. Learn special features of work group meetings. View group tapes. Critique and learn from previous groups' mistakes.
5. Get assignment memo for second round of oral presentations. Questions as needed. Adjourn. (REMINDER: Call A-V Center at 6-7629 to schedule your taping in 322 Nicholson. Be punctual. THIS TAPING IS ASSMT. 7.)

The day's outside reading, 35 pages in a leading textbook on business meetings, not only provides the class as a whole with more information than they could pick up from a lecture, but provides most of the specifics for the day's two student presentations (indicated by dollar signs), outlined and evaluated on preprinted forms. The previous day's minutes, produced and distributed beforehand by each recorder in turn, offer a real-life taste of meeting fare besides providing a bit of continuity. The minutes also serve to focus attention on good writing practices, as will the students' graded group writing project, turned back today.

After hearing the two student presentations, the class will view one or two videotapes of the previous course's experience with the memo-ranking meeting task (the VCR will be operated by a class member). Lessons about the importance of using good agendas and doing one's homework before a meeting will emerge inductively as people watch their predecessors struggle with the same assignment just handed out to this group. As today's adjournment time nears, students receive an 11-item quiz over all the week's work. Because there are quizzes but no Final Exam--and because of the regular peer pressure in small groups and class meetings--students are motivated to maintain a more or less steady work output over the quarter.

A note about small groups: since registering students are screened for prerequisite courses in college writing and (or) speech-communication, putting them into work groups of four or five and assigning several collectively graded projects seems to be a relatively efficient way to expose them to detailed writing and speech conventions and performance standards, as long as the group assignments are worked out carefully. (On the first day, schedule grids and background questionnaires are filled out and turned in. Small groups are made up on the basis of similar schedules, similar interests, and complementary strengths as suggested by individual prerequisite courses listed.)

The eight small groups observed to date have generally proven cohesive and efficient, with members cooperating in a self-determined division of labor. Predictable interpersonal competitiveness is usually redirected into a friendly intergroup rivalry, bolstered by my periodic strategic praise of a given group. (Only two groups have not cohered well, one made up of males deliberately quarantined for "senioritis" and the other decimated by personal tragedy and other unforeseeable trouble.)

During class meetings the groups usually elect to sit together, wearing their color-coded name badges (though these quickly become superfluous). The classes proceed like business meetings: there are agendas, minutes, reports from the floor and other touches of light parliamentary structure. The agenda items are mostly worded as imperatives. This lets a student mark his or her daily progress through a highly specific series of performance objectives, e.g. "Learn conventional sections of a formal report." Our Functional Communication Corporation, then, could be summarized as an organization of interdependent office workers overseen by a manager on a tight production schedule (which was not, however, graven on anything more durable than ditto paper), working on projects of clear value to present or future business people, and often to standards of their own setting. An informal Contract which stipulates grade criteria (including rationed absences) protected the workers against capricious actions by the supervisor. Agenda and Contract together protected the supervisor against major labor problems by spelling out all expectations from the start. Certain details were negotiable. The ideal, as you will by now have grasped, is the legendary Management By Objective.[7]

RESULTS

Our results thus far would seem to justify the risks taken: student and faculty burnout, the possibility of wasted grant money, charges of superficiality from the occasional gored faculty ox protecting specialized turf. We sampled student morale with formative and summative evaluations; the first experimental group (for example) called for no major changes in conception, organization or workload, and summative evaluation revealed their strong agreement that the fairly great amount of work had in fact been appropriate for the 5 credits earned.[8] Summative evaluation pointed up the typical response: they had learned

very much.[9]

As mentioned before, performance on the cognitive pre- post-test justifies student opinions of having learned a lot. Designed to test for theoretical as well as more performance-oriented information, the pre- post is so challenging that nobody thus far has made fewer than nine errors out of fifty items. (The rate may in fact be rather low, in that about a quarter of the test involves communication concepts--"kinesics," group "task behaviors" and the like--and concepts as such are normally relegated to the readings.) The gratifying tripling of the size of top-third groups is also reflected on the "bottom line": for the first experiment, final grades (unaffected by performance on the anonymous post-test) corresponded pretty closely to the post-test breakdown.[10]

A different kind of pre- post-test measurement dealt with self-confidence concerning communication activities, through ranked attitudes. This too shows meaningful upward movement. Whereas one-third of the first group had initially admitted not feeling very confident about their writing, all but one post-test respondent said they felt confident or fully confident. Improved self-confidence was also expressed on items referring to speech and A-V skills, and here even more people (38.1% relative frequency) had initially expressed speech anxiety or misgivings about working with A-V aids. (The group jumped from a 9.5 to 38.9% relative frequency in ranking a statement about feeling fully confident to handle A-V hardware.) About their communication competence overall, all but one respondent said at the end that they felt themselves good or fully effective communicators, whereas initially nobody had felt fully effective and 25% had said they were not very good communicators. Perhaps most gratifying (given the evident realities of today's work world), only a third of the first group said initially that they would feel fully confident working in a small group (33.3% rel.freq.), but at the end of our ten weeks more than three-fourths of the same class (77.8% rel freq.) said they felt fully confident.

IMPLICATIONS

The successes of our first two Functional Communication classes in meeting the tough objectives of the experiment may be cautiously interpreted as evidence

in support of an integrative approach--that is, an approach that borrows a bit from each of three or four conventionally separate courses, and attempts to fit the pieces together in a meaningful and somewhat incremental series of readings, work assignments and interpersonal experiences. I find support in the fact that the cognitive pre- post-test was composed mainly of standard items used in measuring our conventional General College courses, not of test items made up for this experiment. I see the need for caution because only a much wider research effort would establish any basis for directly comparing results produced with integrative versus conventional course designs. However, the very comparison itself may be a bit beside the point. It is not necessarily a question of which approach is "better," at all. (It is certainly not the intention or the expectation of any of us that the traditional communication courses would ever be supplanted by FC.) For the specific needs of business and professionally-oriented students demanding an intensive "generalist's" grounding in communication--and with modifications for the needs also of an adult population already ensconced in the work world--the continuing Functional Communication experiment seems to have right answers. For students seeking to specialize in communication, our more conventional curriculum--packaged under the same general brand name of FC but branching out into many more discrete areas of study--will continue to offer a solid core for one of our four-year degree programs in General College. (The admittedly confusing relationship between the parts and the whole is addressed in my program's direct-mail brochure, free for the asking.)

For those among our ABCA members who might wish to think about trying their own versions of our integrated FC experiment, let me offer the following list of conclusions that relate to the possibilities and limitations of FC:

1. For best results the students should be screened for some basic communication preparation--and for personal motivation--before being allowed to register. They should hear that FC can demand "extra effort" (and hours), just like a salaried job.

2. The course objectives should be focused on skills acquisition and tied to inductive, experiential learning through performance of work assignments representative of the actual workplaces.

3. The local corporate community as well as academic communication specialists should assist in developing the work assignments and readings, which will vary depending on the location of one's school and the makeup of its supporting community.

4. Large blocks of time, preferably at least two two-hour sessions weekly plus one or two individually scheduled hours, must be allotted.

5. A congenial room large enough to establish the optimal "semifixed-feature" meeting space,[11] and permitting fairly easy access to a taping studio, must be assured. Standard A-V meeting equipment should include VCR and TV monitor, 16mm, overhead, and 35mm slide projectors, etc. Word processing terminals would ideally be included too.

6. The organization model should be adopted for the course, including small group subdivisions. The upper limit for the class is about 21 students, and five is optimal for small groups. Larger class size will require heavier parliamentary meeting structure, reducing individual participation and class morale overall.

7. There is reason to think that a ten-week term might be about right. Less time would cut into class esprit and topics covered; more time in such intensive learning would run the risk of exhausting everyone.

8. Work assignments should be integrated as much as possible to give the sense of incremental learning. Real company classes should use work in progress (if supervisors agree) or at least company files. A prescriptive rationale for grades ("This is considered incorrect") is less effective than a descriptive, operational rationale ("Because that expression is less common, it'll distract from your message").

9. Students should be offered some control over procedures, scheduling and grades. Anything increasing their vested interest will enhance morale and thus learning.

10. Textbooks selected and original materials written for the course (agendas, "contracts," assignment memos, etc.) should create a tone of reasonableness, realistic expectations, and concern for human needs.[12]

To expand briefly on this last point: I venture to suggest that your highest priority should be giving careful attention to the communication "climate" in all its features, from the meeting place to the work methods to the communication style of the instructor. Creating a comfortable communication atmosphere is perhaps the true end of a course like FC, and not the means to some other end.[13] Tentatively--for our experiment is not finished and never will be (in one sense) --I recommend this kind of integrative communication "corporation" as a cost-effective, synergistic way to distribute crucially important communication ideas in the right circumstances.

The General College, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Notes

1. Jill B. Gidmark, "Mixing Business With Academics: A New Breed of Cooperation." ABCA Bulletin XLIV no. 3 (September, 1981), 15-17.

2. General College Fact Sheet (internally published pamphlet), 1982.

3. For example, Michigan State University's Ninth Annual Recruiting Trends Survey (1980) reported that "the ability to write and speak effectively is cited by employers as the greatest need of college graduates for entry into full-time work" (p. ii). The Endicott Report 1981, similarly, notes the employer recommendation that new graduates "develop communication skills--oral and written" (p. 7).

4. Curricula and individual courses have for many years included some speech-communication in the standard business writing courses, and Larry M. Robinson's recent article describes how one prestigious school is requiring communication: "Integrating Communication Instruction in the Wharton MBA Curriculum," ABCA Bulletin XXXXII no. 3 (September, 1979), 1-2. Feinberg's opinion in 1980 was that no single course probably existed which integrated writing, communication and A-V as FC proposed to do.

5. Harry Levinson gives this estimate in his article "Asinine Attitudes Toward Motivation," Harvard Business Review 51 no. 1 (January, 1973), 70-76.

6. This figure is from Joseph L. Massie and John Douglas, Managing: A Contemporary Introduction (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 97.

7. Considered as a stimulus to industrial productivity, MBO of course remains controversial. (See, for example, J.M. Ivancevich, "A Longitudinal Assessment of Management by Objectives," Administrative Science Quarterly 17 (March, 1972), 126-138.) But potential for MBO seems better in the classroom, where communication is less difficult and project turnaround time much shorter than in industry.

8. On an attitudinal scale of 1 ("very strongly disagree") to 7 ("most strongly agree"), the mean response was 5.8 ("strongly/very strongly agree").

9. The mean response was 6.2 ("learned very much") on the scale of 1 to 7.

10. Of nineteen students completed the first experimental offering, the breakdown was ten A's, six B's, one C and one "Satisfactory" (minimal equivalent of C work).

11. Edward T. Hall, The Hidden Dimension (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1966), pp. 103-112.

12. The importance of creating reasonable-sounding, optimistic written communication is emphasized in Raymond W. Kulhavy's and Neil H. Schwartz's "Tone of Communication and Climate Perceptions," Journal of Business Communication 18 no. 3 (Winter, 1981), 17-24.

13. "The climate of an organization is more crucial than are communication skills and techniques in creating an effective organization," wrote R. Wayne Pace in "An Experiential Approach to Teaching Organizational Communication," Journal of Business Communication 14 no. 4 (Summer, 1977), p. 41. Of course, communication skill is required to create that climate, and acquiring the ability to create an optimal work climate for themselves--acquiring it if only by osmosis--could arguably be considered the ultimate and most demanding skill FC can teach its students.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test Errors, 1st Experiment

# of Errors:	Pre-Test:	Post-Test:
9, 10	0	2
11, 12	1	2
13, 14	0	1
15, 16	2	7
17, 18	2	2
19, 20	0	2
21, 22	4	1
23, 24	4	1
25, 26	3	0
27, 28	0	0
29, 30	2	0
31, 32	2	0
33, 34	1	0

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Test Errors, 2nd Experiment

# of Errors:	Pre-Test:	Post-Test:
9, 10	0	0
11, 12	0	0
13, 14	0	0
15, 16	1	1
17, 18	1	4
19, 20	2	2
21, 22	0	0
23, 24	1	2
25, 26	4	1
27, 28	3	2
29, 30	1	2
31, 32	1	0
33, 34	1	0
35, 36	0	0
37, 38	2	0